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The Tension between Representation and Concept as a Challenge for Philosophy of Religion

Peter Jonkers (Utrecht)

Introduction

From a historical perspective, the terms representation and concept refer primarily to Hegel's philosophy. In his philosophy of religion, Hegel uses the term representation in order to indicate that religion is a whole of religious convictions, stories, theological statements, works of art, rituals, feasts, and institutions. The term representation thus refers to the subjective as well as the objective, the sensuous as well as the rational dimension of religion. This means that religion is not to be reduced to abstract moral categories, as religious criticism of the Enlightenment and Kant's philosophy of religion had tried to do. For this *Vernunftreligion* ignores the positivity of religion, i.e. its actual, historic, and institutionalized shape. Nor is religion to be reduced to a purely inner religious conviction (as was done by Jacobi and Schleiermacher). For this passes over the fact that an inner religious state of mind necessarily externalizes itself in a religious reality, which is also accessible for others.

The term concept, on the other hand, refers to philosophy as conceptual knowing. According to Hegel's well-known statement "what is important in the *study of science*, is that one should take on oneself the strenuous effort of the concept."¹ Contrary to a current opinion, philosophy is anything but a simple application of general schemes and concepts to any content. Typical for the philosopher is to bury itself in reality in all its rich diversity. During this process, he discovers that reality is neither a monolithic unity nor a mixed lot of objective facts or subjective opinions, but is a dynamically developing whole. The

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 9, *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes* (ed. W. Bonsiepen and R. Heede; Hamburg 1980), 41. In the following, this work is referred to in the main text as (GW 9...).

specific task of conceptual knowing is to discover *within* this dynamic whole the internal necessary connection, and thus to reveal its (universal) truth. This is the result of the strenuous effort of the concept. Truth has only the concept as the element of its existence (GW 9.12), because the universality of truth can only be understood as such on the level of the universal concept.

In sum, representation and concept differ clearly, but are simultaneously thrown together. From this double bind results a tension, which becomes apparent in the complex relationship between religion and philosophy. In his attempt to conceptualize the religious reality, the philosopher notices a discrepancy in the religious representation itself. Religion and philosophy both have the same content, viz. God or the absolute.² But the philosopher notices that the content of religion, the truth it represents, is not adapted to the form in which it expresses itself, religious representation. This form is characterized by sensuousness (e.g. the use of images rituals in religion), particularity (e.g. the attachment to the unique, historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ), and opposition (e.g. between the world and God). Those characteristics are not in accordance with the spiritual, universal and one character of truth itself. This discrepancy between content and form of religion causes an inner dynamism, which supersedes religion in philosophy. As conceptual knowing, philosophy thus understands the truth of religion more adequately than religion itself. The fact that religious representation and philosophical concept are both one (as regards content) and different (as regards form), implies that religion and philosophy inevitably are at odds with each other.

As is common knowledge, Hegel's perception of the substantial unity and formal distinction between religion and philosophy proved to be a divisive element for the interpretation of his thought. Shortly after his death in 1831 a furious dispute on this issue began between left- and right-Hegelians. Basing themselves upon Hegel's proposition that religion and philosophy share the same *content*, viz. the absolute, the right-Hegelians concluded that consequently also the *form*, through

² Notably with regard to Christian religion and idealistic philosophy, these terms are completely synonymous. Cf. the Preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "That the True is actual only as [philosophical] system, . . . is expressed in the representation of the Absolute as Spirit, – the most sublime concept and the one which belongs to the modern age and its religion" (GW 9.22).

which religion represents the absolute, was justified philosophically. In this context, philosophy of religion becomes apologetics. On the other hand, the left-Hegelians (including philosophers like Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Feuerbach) appealed to the subordinate character of the *form* of religious representation in comparison with philosophical concept in order to conclude that also the *content* of religion cannot be the same as the absolute of speculative philosophy.³ In their view, the supersession of religious representation in conceptual, philosophical knowing did not mean the justification of religion, but on the contrary its annihilation. Philosophy of religion thus is tantamount to the most radical form of religious criticism. Meanwhile, recent research has shown that Hegel's view of the supersession of religious representation in philosophical concept has both an apologetic and a critical character. The fact that philosophy is able to understand religious representation, presupposes that the latter is in principle understandable. This means that Hegel's philosophy of religion unmistakably has an apologetic character. But it also implies a criticism of religion. Philosophy indeed justifies representation, but only as a subordinate configuration of truth. Certainly, according to Hegel the supersession of religion in philosophy does not mean the pushing aside of the former, but religion is neither the highest configuration of the knowledge of truth.⁴ And this observation does not only apply to Hegel's mature philosophy of religion, but also to the relationship between manifest religion and absolute knowing in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.⁵

This short summary of the manifold questions and problems that Hegel's conception of the relationship between representation and concept has raised, is an indication for the fundamental issue, which is at stake here. It concerns the heart of philosophy of religion as such, i.e. also apart from a hegelian context. Of course, Christian religion has a long tradition of intellectual approaches of faith. They all are based upon the medieval adage *credo ut intelligam*, and can be conceived as pious clarifications (hermeneutics) and possibly purging (criticism) of

³ W. Jaeschke, *Die Religionsphilosophie Hegels* (Darmstadt 1983), 110–11.

⁴ W. Jaeschke, *Die Religionsphilosophie Hegels*, 112–13.

⁵ R. Devos, "The Significance of Manifest Religion in the *Phenomenology*," in *Hegel on Ethical Life, Religion and Philosophy* (ed. A. Willeman; Leuven 1989), 229. In this context, Devos refers to the "architectonical" passages at the beginning of the section on religion, in which Hegel distinguishes between configurations and moments of the spirit in order to clarify the enduring significance of religion for absolute knowing. Cf. GW 9.365 ff.

our spontaneous religious convictions. In essence, they are an *internal* hermeneutic and critique of religion by a faithful reason, i.e. by a reason that stands within a religious framework and is well aware of its being a handmaid of religion. Such a faithful or theological reason understands religion, but is at the same time respectful of its specific character, as it remains tributary to religious representations. This faithful reason not only fulfils the needs of a religious individual, but is also indispensable for religion as such. Since religion is most concerned to hand down the treasure of its truth undistortedly to the next generations, it cannot dispense of an interpretation and criticism of its heritage.

But one can wonder whether the adage *credo ut intelligam* still suffices as the outline of the project of philosophy of religion. For the unmediated unity of faith and reason has collapsed in the modern age. What does this mean for philosophy of religion? Is autonomous philosophy still capable to understand the representational universe of religion? Would it not be better to accept the modern split between faith and reason and conclude that both should confine themselves to their own domain? In our times, some theologians and philosophers foster such a partition. Heidegger refuses a metaphysical reflection on the question of God. In his view, a philosophy that wants to do more than offering a phenomenology of religion is a "wooden iron." The mingling of the problem of God and being in onto-theology harms as well the radical and equivocal nature of the philosophical question of being as the God of religion, for whom one must be able to sing and dance. And following the line of thought of Wittgenstein, philosophers plea for a "disconnection" between philosophical cognition and religious meaning. Religion cannot be reduced to theoretical propositions, nor can they in any way support or undermine it. In the fields of religion and theology too, there is an old tradition that is very skeptical towards any attempt to understand the Good Tidings with the help of philosophical concepts. What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, what is the importance of the God of the philosophers and scientists to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Specifically with regard to metaphysical approaches in philosophy of religion, of which Hegel is one of the most prominent examples, the question is whether they will be able to resist their secret tendency of confining religion within the

bounds of pure reason. Doesn't such a philosophical interference with religion inevitably lead to an annihilation of religious representations?⁶

At first sight, there seems to be a major contrast between all these fundamental and penetrating questions about the nature of philosophy of religion in our days, and the (relative) ease with which Hegel states that the supersession of religious representation in philosophy is necessary. I think that appearances are deceiving here, and I want to show this in my contribution. All fundamental questions that I mentioned above, played also for Hegel a crucial role in his search for an adequate interpretation of the relationship between religion and philosophy, representation and concept. An intriguing testimony of his struggle with this issue is the transition between the theological writings of his youth and his mature work, which is clearly philosophical. Within a short period of time, his answers to the questions asked above differ greatly. I want to examine the reasons of these differences. It will turn out that Hegel's intellectual analysis of this issue still offers us a lot of food for thought. This gives me the opportunity, in the conclusion of this contribution, to look for possible answers to the systematic questions with regard to the relation between representation and concept, such as they are prominently present in contemporary philosophy of religion. I will do so in a dialogue with Hegel.

Should Philosophy Stop Short of Religion?

In an early text, the so-called *Fragment of a System*,⁷ Hegel (for the first time) dwells upon the relation between religion and philosophy. He shows that religion elevates man to a mode of life, which is on principle beyond the reach of his (philosophical) thinking. Every

⁶ For a critical analysis of these positions cf. P. Jonkers, "Metafysische beschouwingen over religie en waarheid," in *Kijken naar de zoni: Filosofische essays over de godspraak* (ed. L. Braeckman and A. Coors; Kapellen 1998), 190 and 203 ff.

⁷ Hegel wrote this text during his stay in Frankfurt (1797–1800). The *Fragment of a System* consists of two separate parts of a lost larger essay, completed on September 14, 1800. The title, which was given to this text by the first editor of Hegel's early writings (1793–1800), H. Nohl, is incorrect, since it conveys the impression that Hegel at this time already disposed of a fully developed philosophical system. However, at this time Hegel was still working on a philosophical system. Moreover, the text of the *Fragment of a System* clearly shows that he considered a conceptually formulated system impossible. Cf. M. Fujita, *Philosophie und Religion beim jungen Hegel* (Hegel-Studien, Beiheft 26; Bonn 1985), 107.

attempt to determine this mode of life conceptually ends in contradictions.⁸ Therefore philosophy should stop short of religion. Seen from the perspective of Hegel's mature work, this view is very surprising. Therefore it is worthwhile to take a closer look at it. Religion is "the elevation of man from finite life to infinite life."⁹ Infinite life can be called a spirit, a living unity of the manifold individual living beings. Consequently, this spirit does not stand above all these individual lives, but is united with them, inspires them as living organs. By doing so it makes of the whole a living unity of living beings. Hegel conceives the elevation to infinite life in the following way.

When man takes the infinite life as the spirit of the whole and at the same time as a living being outside himself (since he himself is restricted), and when he himself puts himself at the same time outside his restricted self in rising toward the [infinite] living being and intimately uniting himself with him, then he worships God (N. 347).

This elevation towards infinite life, as much as infinite life, God himself, cannot be thought or contemplated, because the infinite living unity does not contain conceptual determinations. Therefore philosophy "should stop short of religion." If it repudiates this inherent limitation, it gets entangled in contradictions. It is important to note here that both in the *Fragment of a System* and in all other early writings of Hegel, this infinite living unity also has an ethico-political dimension, more specifically the harmonious living together of free people in a living community. Seen from this perspective, infinite life is also the realization of "the good life" in the ethical and political sense of the word.

Hegel illustrates the insuperable difficulties of a conceptual approach of religion by showing what happens if philosophy nevertheless tries to determine the relationship between unity and multiplicity in religion conceptually. In the living unity of religion, such as explained above, the multiplicity is no longer present as such. It only exists as far as it is related to the living spirit, as a living organ of this spirit. But when one

starts to reflect about this, it appears that within this unity something is still being excluded, viz. multiplicity as far as it is not related to unity.

In other words, when the multiple is conceived as an organ only [in relation to this living unity], opposition itself is excluded; but life cannot be regarded as union or relation alone, but must be considered as opposition as well. If I say that life is the union of opposition and relation, this union may be isolated again, and it may be argued that union is opposed to non-union (N. 348).

By arguing so, Hegel points out that the living unity of religion is annihilated if one starts to think about it reflexively. The process of reflective thinking produces time and again new propositions about life as a unity of union and non-union, and can continue with this indefinitely. "Every expression whatsoever is a product of reflection, and therefore it is possible to demonstrate in the case of every expression that, when reflection propounds it, another expression, not propounded, is excluded" (N. idem). Since this reflective process of posing and opposing, of including and excluding can go on indefinitely and is without any rest, the religious unity of life is lost more and more out of sight. Therefore, Hegel states that it must lie beyond this conceptual process of posing and opposing. The elevation to infinite life is not the result of an act of thinking, but the fruit of God's inspiration, who is also at work in finite life. "What has been called a union of synthesis and antithesis is not something propounded by the understanding or by reflection, but has a character of its own, namely that of being a reality beyond all reflection" (N. idem). "Philosophy therefore has to stop short of religion, because it is a process of thinking and, as such a process, implies an opposition with non-thinking as well as an opposition between the thinking mind and the object of thought" (N. idem).

But in spite of its fundamental limitations, philosophy nevertheless is of vital importance to religion, although this importance is a limited and propaedeutic one. Philosophy does not coincide completely with the opposing activity of reflection, but is also the work of "reason." "Philosophy has to disclose the finiteness in all finite things and require their integration by means of reason. In particular, it has to recognize the illusions generated by its own infinite and thus to place the true infinite outside its confines" (N. 348). With this, Hegel indicates that the philosophy (as reason) explicitly realizes the limited character of the reflective determinations. Moreover, it shows these limitations as such. Consequently, it has an implicit and negative consciousness of the true

⁸ A. Wylleman, "Driven forth to science," in *Hegel on Ethical Life, Religion and Philosophy* (ed. A. Wylleman; Leuven 1989), 32.

⁹ H. Nohl, *Hegels theologische Jugendchriften* (Tübingen 1907; Repr. 1966), 347. In the following, I refer to this work in the main text as (N...).

infinite. In this sense philosophy is a preparation for religion; religion starts where philosophy has to stop, and is able to build its infinite unity upon the (philosophical) consciousness of the inherent limitations of reason.

This analysis of the first part of the *Fragment of a System* is very illustrative for Hegel's idea about the relationship between religion and philosophy, as he conceived it in the fall of 1800. Philosophy is not capable of understanding what religion is all about, viz. God as a living, unifying spirit and the spiritual elevation of man to this unity. As I said above, this unity also has an ethical and political dimension, the harmonious living together of people in a free community. By means of its concepts, philosophy tears this infinite unity apart and converts it into opposed determinations. On a political level, this is what happened in the modern state and in the political theory of Enlightenment, which interpreted this process; because they were no longer able to surmount their mutual differences and establish a political community, people became fundamentally unhappy. In this situation, philosophy is only implicitly aware of the true infinite, which however is beyond the reach of its concepts. Thus, the representational world of religion is not a preparation for conceptual knowing, but conversely conceptual knowing is a primarily negative preparation for the true infinite of religion.

Only half a year after the completion of this text, Hegel interprets the relation between religion and philosophy in a completely different way. According to the so-called *Difference-essay*,¹⁰ written during the spring of 1801, the task of philosophy is precisely to know God and to elevate man to this knowing. Apparently, religion is no longer capable to fulfil this task. As in the period before, the main purpose of Hegel's intellectual activity is to elevate man to the infinite unity of life, which is the unification and supersession of the oppositions of finite life. But

¹⁰ This essay, the *Difference* between Fichte's and Schelling's *System of Philosophy*, is Hegel's first publication. It is a very extensive (the original edition counted more than 180 pages) review of a book of C. L. Reinhold on the state of philosophy at the beginning of the 19th century. Especially the first part of Hegel's text has a explicitly programmatic character. He expounds in this essay his view on the task and content of philosophy. In the following I will refer to this text, as well as to other works of this period, in the main text as (GW 4...). The references are made to G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 4, *Jenener kritische Schriften* (ed. H. Buchner and O. Pöggeler, Hamburg 1968).

the way in which this unity can be reached, is not any more religious, but philosophical. "When the power of union vanishes from the life of men and the oppositions lose their living connection and reciprocity and gain independence, the need of philosophy arises" (GW 4.13). This need has two aspects. "One is the absolute itself. It is the goal that is being sought; but it is already present, or how otherwise could it be sought? Reason produces it, merely by freeing consciousness from its limitations" (GW 4.15). In another context Hegel writes about this aspect that it is in the interest of philosophy "to put God back again at the peak of philosophy, absolutely prior to all else as the one and only ground of everything, the unique *principium essendi* and *cognoscendi*" (GW 4.179). Therefore, it would be the death of philosophy if "reason should renounce its existence in the absolute, excluding itself totally from it and relating itself to it only negatively" (GW 4.316). The second aspect of the need of philosophy "may be taken to be that consciousness has stepped out of the totality, that is, it may be taken to be the split into being and non-being, concept and being, finitude and infinity" (GW 4.15). Thus, the (modern) awareness of the loss of the original unity of God and man, as it still existed in (premodern) religion, creates the need of philosophy. The task of philosophy is to unite these two aspects (the presence of the absolute for reason and the fact that consciousness has stepped out of totality), viz. "to posit being in non-being, as becoming; to posit dichotomy in the absolute, as its appearance; to posit the finite in the infinite, as life" (GW 4.16). On the other hand, religion is no longer capable of impressing the ideal of an all-embracing unity of life on the minds of people. It has ended on the fringes of modern civilization and has lost its importance for man to a large extent. "As it progressed, civilization has split away from religion, and juxtaposed it to itself. What happens in one has no significance in the other" (GW 4.15).

The question is how to interpret this sudden and radical change in Hegel's conception of the relation between religion and philosophy. Naturally, this question is of vital importance in order to get a clear view on the origin and development of his philosophical project. But moreover, it can give us a better insight in the systematic issue of the relationship between religion and philosophy, representation and concept as such. First of all, I want to point at briefly some obvious answers to the question mentioned above. When we look at the status of Hegel's approach of religion in the *Fragment of a System*, there is an evident tension between his own way of dealing with religion and the

specific nature of religion itself. The *Fragment of a System* manifestly offers a philosophical approach of religion as such.¹¹ Hegel writes about the nature of infinite life, which one can call a spirit, about its relationship to multiplicity, and about the problems involved with this. The language, in which these remarks are formulated, is clearly philosophical, in particular a conceptual clarification of the various configurations of infinite life and their mutual connection. But on the other hand, the specific character of religion is to be outside and above rationality, "a reality beyond all reflection." Thus, in this text Hegel tries to carry out a task, which is impossible in itself: he gives a philosophical analysis of the essence of religion, whereas this essence is inaccessible for philosophy. The growing awareness of this tension probably played a role in Hegel's shift with regard to the relation between religion and philosophy. A second obvious answer to the question asked above is the fact that Hegel, in January 1801, moved from Frankfurt to Jena in order to devote himself completely to the study of philosophy at the famous university of this town. The influence of his college friend Schelling, who already was serving as philosophy professor in Jena, certainly played a role in his decision. Whatever may be of this, Hegel's publications get from this time on a clearly philosophical outlook. He keeps interested in religion, but approaches it explicitly from a philosophical perspective. Thus, he solves the tension that was still present in the *Fragment of a System* (cf. above). However, this change of perspective is only possible, because his idea of the capabilities of philosophy had changed. From the Jena period on, philosophy does not coincide any more with reflection, i.e. with a kind of knowing, which gets entangled in all kinds of contradictions when it tries to formulate the absolute. As speculative knowing, philosophy is capable of grasping both the moment of opposition and contradiction, and the moment of their absolute unity, from which all oppositions originate. But above all, it can and must render this complex relationship between unity and opposition in a systematic and conceptual way. These explanations of Hegel's shift from a religious to a philosophical perspective already have been interpreted quite often.¹² However, the issue I want to

concentrate upon in this contribution, is another element of the question mentioned above: what has, in Hegel's eyes, happened with religion, why is it no longer capable of elevating man to infinite life, and why can this task only be carried out by philosophy?¹³

Can Philosophy Contribute to the Coming of the Kingdom of God?

The classical text, in which Hegel gives his view on this change of perspective, is a letter to Schelling of November 2, 1800, written when he already had decided to leave Frankfurt and devote himself to the study of philosophy.

In my scientific development, which began from the more subordinate needs of men, I had to be driven forth to science, and the ideal of my youth [in this process] had to change to [something that had] the form of reflection [and] at the same time to a system. I wonder now, while I am still busy on it, what return there is to the intervention in the life of men.¹⁴

The ideal, about which Hegel writes here, is the Kingdom of God.¹⁵ Already in a letter of 1795 to Schelling, he wrote: "May the Kingdom of God come, may our hands not rest idle in our laps."¹⁶ "May Your Kingdom come," was also the slogan, with which Hegel and Hölderlin took leave of each other at the end of their student-meetings at the seminary of Tübingen. Hölderlin wrote about this: "I am sure that, whatever may happen to you, time will never wipe out this feature [viz. the pursuing of this ideal] of yours."¹⁷ The ideal Hegel and his friends were pursuing, was a unity of life, which would bring individual and social freedom, harmony, and happiness to man. As such it is the realization of the good life in the ethical and political sense of the word. In this line of thought, this ideal was for Hegel primarily of practical importance, viz. to intervene in the life of men. A concrete example of this is the elevation of man to the infinite life in religion

¹¹ A. Wylleman, *Hegel on Ethical Life, Religion and Philosophy*, 32.

¹² For a detailed survey of these interpretations cfr. S. Zhang, *Hegels Übergang zum System. Eine Untersuchung zum sogenannten 'Systemfragment von 1800'* (Hegel-Studien, Beiheft 32; Bonn 1991), 23 ff. .

¹³ For a more technical examination of this issue cfr. P. Jonkers, "Can Philosophy Replace Religion? Tensions in Hegel's Attitude Towards Religion in 1800," in *Hegel-Jahrbuch* (1998), 210–16.

¹⁴ J. Hoffmeister, ed., *Briefe von und an Hegel* (Hamburg 1969), 1: 59–60.

¹⁵ Cf. for this interpretation a.o. A. Wylleman, *Hegel on Ethical Life, Religion and Philosophy*, 38 ff.

¹⁶ Hoffmeister, *Briefe von und an Hegel* 1: 18.

¹⁷ Hoffmeister, *Briefe von und an Hegel* 1: 9.

(cf. the *Fragment of a System*). But also from the Jena-period on, when the ideal of his youth had received a reflective form, the practical character of this ideal is initially preserved. The need of philosophy is neither only nor primarily the need of Hegel as an individual on the way of his philosophical education. First of all, it is the need of a torn civilization for a thinking that is able to overcome oppositions and restore the power of unification. Hegel is even clearer on this point in his course-notes of this period. The question about the need of philosophy eventually comes down to the issue of "the relation of philosophy to life, and this question coincides with the issue to what extent philosophy is practical. For the true need of philosophy leads to nothing else than that one learns to live through it."¹⁸ Thus, one can conclude that Hegel's intellectual activity, irrespectively whether it is religious or philosophical, is in service of a religious and ethico-political ideal, which is practical by nature.

However, the second part of the letter quoted above, gives a hint why Hegel changed his attitude with regard to the capability of religion to realize the ideal of his youth. Working on his philosophical system, he wonders what *return* to the intervention in the life of men can be found. Apparently he was convinced that he could no longer realize the practical objectives of his intellectual activity with the help of religion. Religion has lost its impact on the life of men; it is no longer capable of elevating man from finite to infinite life. This view presupposes an important change in Hegel's idea on the place of religion in (modern) civilization. With this we have come to the heart of my contribution.

Already in the last pages of the second part of the *Fragment of a System* Hegel shows his skepticism about the capability of religion to realize its ideal of the infinite unity of life fully in modern civilization.¹⁹ "Some such elevation is necessary because the finite depends on the infinite" (N. 350). But how complete this religious elevation actually is, depends on the accidental historical situation of a people. An unhappy people, and Hegel thinks specifically of the German people of his time, get stuck on a certain stage of opposition and unification, and are not capable of reaching the most perfect unity. Their lives are too

¹⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 5, *Schriften und Entwürfe* (1799–1808) (ed. M. Baum und K. R. Meist; Hamburg 1998), 261.

¹⁹ Cf. Fujita, *Philosophie und Religion beim jungen Hegel*, 121; Zhang, *Hegels Übergang zum System*, 80.

much torn apart and separated, so that they cannot reach a perfect harmony with God's infinite unity of life. Also from an ethico-political perspective, this means that the realization of the good life has vanished from their lives, and that their individual differences become dominant. In such a state of separation, these people *must* take anxious care for the preservation of one member [of the whole], i.e., for their own independence" (N. 350). For if they would not care about this, both man and God would disappear out of sight. In this split situation God appears as an alien, remote, inaccessible object, who controls man and subjects him. But although this relationship between God and man is the opposite of unity and harmony, it at least preserves the bond between them. This means that, in modern times, religion has arrived at an impasse: instead of its unifying power, opposition has come to the fore. This situation of course has its consequences for the nature of religious elevation: "The elevation of finite to infinite life would only be an elevation *over* finite life . . . This religion can be sublime and awful, but it cannot be beautifully humane" (N. 351). Hegel considers this situation as a sign of the times.

In the *Difference-essay* and in *Faith and Knowledge*, a long article for the *Critical Journal of Philosophy* of 1802, Hegel examines more closely the consequences of modern civilization for religion. "As culture grows and spreads, . . . the power of dichotomy becomes greater, . . . and the strivings of life to give birth once more to its harmony become more meaningless, more alien to the cultural whole" (GW 4.14). Herewith, Hegel specifically has religion and art in mind. They could only be effective up to a certain level of civilization, but were put aside in modern culture. "Because [in modern times] the intellect has grown sure of itself, both [intellect and the aesthetic and religious perfection] have come to enjoy a measure of mutual peace by separating into realms that are completely set apart from one another. What happens in one has no significance in the other" (GW 4.15). Modern religion can serve as a typical example of this ongoing tendency towards separation and dichotomy of what in essence belongs together. "Religion builds its temples and altars in the heart of the individual. In sighs and prayers he seeks for the God whom he denies to himself in intuition" (GW 4.316). This religion "does not have a communion with God and a consciousness of the divine that consists in the saturating objectivity of a cult and in which *this* nature and *this* universe are enjoyed in the present and seen in a sight that is in itself clear. Instead it makes communion with God and consciousness of the

divine into something inward that maintains its fixed form of inwardness; it makes them into a yearning for a beyond and a future" (GW 4.384). Thus, in modern culture religion itself gets entangled in all kinds of oppositions, such as between subjective and objective, internal and external, this world and the hereafter etc.

But the fact that religion, in modern civilization, has lost its unifying power does not detract at all the truth of its content.

Religion has its sublime aspect as feeling, the love filled with eternal longing; for it does not get hung up on any transitory sight or enjoyment, it yearns for eternal beauty and bliss. Religion, as this longing, is subjective; but what it seeks and what is not given to it in intuition, is the absolute and eternal (GW 4.317).

This means that the content of religion and philosophy is the same, viz. the absolute. But the form of religion, namely a purely internal vision of and a subjective longing for an unattainable beyond, is inadequate. For this form is not able to elevate man to infinite life, and moreover it is in conflict with the real content of religion, the absolute as an all-embracing unity.

Let me recapitulate briefly. Characteristic for modern culture is that the power of unification has vanished from the life of men, and the oppositions have lost their living relationship and interaction. Religion, on its turn, is dragged off in this turmoil and consequently has lost its unifying power. In this situation, it can only keep its bond with the divine by withdrawing into the sphere of the interior. However, this loss does not have an overall negative meaning, but is at the same time the source of the need of philosophy. "Dichotomy is the source of *the need of philosophy*; and as the culture of the era, it is the unfree and given aspect of the whole configuration [of this era]" (GW 4.12). Why does the loss of a particular form of unification, namely religion, necessarily turn into the need of philosophy? What is the nature of this connection? The answer to this question sheds a light on Hegel's view on the relation between (religious) representation and (philosophical) concept, as well as on the nature of modern civilization.

At the basis of the disruptions of modernity lies the power of understanding. This is a form of reflective knowledge, which tears apart the infinite unity of life into all kinds of opposite determinations, such as spirit and matter, soul and body, faith and understanding, freedom and necessity, but above all subjectivity and objectivity (GW 4.13). Religion is also affected by this power.

Reason, if it is in fact reason that appropriates this name [in fact it is understanding], has made itself into such an authority within positive religion that a philosophical struggle against the positive, against miracles and suchlike, is now regarded as obsolete and unenlightened (GW 4.315).

Understanding reduces the religious intuition of the divine to a mere thing, the sacred grove to mere timber. "It scrupulously separates the objective from the subjective, and the objective is what is accounted worthless and null" (GW 4.317). In order to preserve its contact with the divine at all, religion consequently has to withdraw into a completely subjective attitude of faith, entirely separated from the knowledge of understanding. Thus it becomes clear that, what Hegel in the *Fragment of a System* still described in general terms as the misfortune of religion in modernity, appears to be caused by the power of understanding, which sees everywhere merely finitude and opposition. When understanding has invaded religion itself, the latter can no longer unify the oppositions, which are present in culture, in a higher unity of life. In stead of elevating man to infinite life, religion is reduced to superstition or entertainment.

Understanding, on the other hand, extends its power endlessly. It erects, as it were, a complete building, composed of all kinds of finite, opposite determinations (like matter and spirit etc.), and places it between man and the absolute, linking everything that man thinks worthy and holy to this building. "The entire totality of limitations is to be found in it, but not the absolute itself" (GW 4.13). It obstructs man to get a view of the absolute. But although in modern culture, understanding tends to extend endlessly, its power is not absolute. On the contrary,

the more stable and splendid the edifice of understanding is, the more restless becomes the striving of the life that is caught up in it as a part to get out of it, and raise itself to freedom. When life as reason steps away into the distance, the totality of limitations is at the same time nullified, and connected with the absolute in this nullification, and hence conceived and posited as mere appearance. The split between the absolute and the totality of limitations thus vanishes (GW 4.13).

With these statements, Hegel presents in a dense way his view on the relationship between religion and philosophy, representation and concept. As a consequence of the enlarging power of understanding, which tears apart the infinite unity of life into an endless series of opposite determinations, the absolute has almost vanished completely

from modern culture. As remarked above, consciousness has stepped out of the totality; the immediate unity of concept and being, finitude and infinity. Man is painfully aware of this development and of the loss that is the result of it. Formulated in religious terms, this comes down to the feeling that "God himself is dead." Modern religion even rests upon the infinite grief, which accompanies the feeling of the loss of God. As a reaction, religion withdraws into the sphere of the internal. Well, it is of vital importance that this experience of the absolute passion or Good Friday "is re-established in the whole truth and harshness of its God-forsakenness" (GW 4.414). Does this mean the end of what religion is all about, God or the absolute? Does the awareness of the death of God imply that philosophy should renounce its task to understand the absolute? By no means! The feeling of the death of God is a radical one, but it is not absolute. Paradoxically, it even has a positive meaning, because this experience is at the same time the heart of the resurrection from death and the coming of the Kingdom of God. Formulated in religious terms, this comes down to the essence of the Christian mystery of faith: "Did the Lord not have to suffer all this to enter in his glory?"²⁰ From this perspective it is important to mark this feeling of the loss of God "purely as a moment of the supreme idea" (GW 4.1dem). The death of God in modern culture enables the true content of religion to come to the fore in a richer way than before. Even stronger, the death of God manifests the absoluteness of the absolute.

But on the other hand, the empirical, historical, and instinctive way in which religion represents its supreme truth is not able any more to break the power of understanding. "The intervention in life," the restoration of the infinite unity of life from the harsh experience of the death of God is not the work of religion any more. When the power of understanding has brought about a split within religion (e.g. between internal and external), and has also separated religion as such from civilization in general (as becomes apparent in the opposition of faith and knowledge), the religious power of unification has vanished from the life of men. All these separations are undeniably characteristic of modernity, more specifically "its unfree and given aspect." The only thing that can and must be done is "to attack understanding directly in its own realm" (GW 4.15). This is the work of reason, resulting in an

annihilation of the absoluteness of separation. Herewith, we have the fundamental reason why the loss of the unifying power of religion necessarily turns into the need of philosophy.

The sole interest of reason is to supersede such rigid oppositions [of understanding]. But this does not mean that reason is altogether opposed to opposition and limitation. For the necessary dichotomy is one factor in life. Life eternally forms itself by setting up oppositions, and totality at the highest pitch of living energy is only possible through its own re-establishment out of the deepest separation (GW 4.13).

Thus, the content of "the interest of reason" is ultimately the same as the interest of religion. But unlike religion, reason is able to cope with the power of understanding. Thus, in modern civilization religion passes its most important practical task, namely to elevate man to infinite life and to realize the good life, on to philosophy, which has a practical task as well in teaching man how to live. This shift implies that the above mentioned religious feelings and experiences have to get a "philosophical existence." The historical experience of Good Friday has to be understood in a speculative way. By doing so, philosophy can at the same time take some distance from the specific form of religion (the empirical, historical, and instinctive), and demonstrate the truth of religion (its content) for reason. Thus philosophy annihilates the separation between faith and reason and restores the power of unification in a new way. Here we see the outline of Hegel's view of the relationship between religion and philosophy, as it is developed in his later works.²¹

The Tension between Representation and Concept

In what has been stated above, I made an analysis of the way in which Hegel conceives the relationship between religion and philosophy, of the radical and sudden changes that took place in this conception, and of the reasons for these changes. In relation with this, we got a clearer view on the question why, in the specific situation of modern culture, philosophy is more capable than religion to understand God or the absolute. In the last paragraph of this contribution, I want to examine more in detail the question of how this analysis can contribute to the project of a philosophy of religion in our times. As a starting-point I

²⁰ Luke 24:26.

²¹ Cf. The introduction to this contribution.

take an article of Paul Ricoeur on the status of representation in Hegel's philosophy of religion and its relation to conceptual knowledge.²² In his view, philosophy of religion is a hermeneutic of religious representation. He claims it to be in accordance with Hegel's philosophy of religion. This hermeneutic is a combination of three dimensions, which together determine what philosophy of religion is or should be. He indicates them with the terms immediacy, representational mediation, and conceptualization. First of all, a hermeneutic of religious representation is only possible because there is a revelation, a non-hermeneutic core, which is the common source of both representational and conceptual thinking. In Christianity, this moment of immediacy is assured by the revelation of Jesus as a historical figure. However, this immediate historical revelation is only accessible for man by its mediation through images, stories, and symbols. The disappearance of immediacy, the distance in time and negativity are the conditions of possibility in order to appropriate the initial event. Herewith we are on the level of representation and interpretation of revelation by a community of faith. On a third level this religious representation is conceptualized. Conceptual or speculative thinking puts the specific representations of the community of faith on a more general level, viz. society as such or the interpretative community in the broadest sense of the word. The concept is able to recapitulate the inner dynamism of representation in a thinking way, which is in principle accessible to anyone. This movement is assured by a driving force, which urges representation on to speculative knowing. But in this process, speculation does not lose its embedding in the original immediacy of revelation and faithful representations out of sight. Thus, philosophy of religion as a hermeneutic of religious representation consists in a permanently circular process, which moves from immediacy to mediation and conceptualization, and then returns again to immediacy.

What prospects does this outline offer for philosophy of religion in our times? In line of my analysis above, I will focus on the third dimension, namely the conceptualization of religious representation. This question also brings us to the heart of the tension between

²² P. Ricoeur, "Le statut de la Vorstellung dans la philosophie hégélienne de la religion," in *Idem, Lectures 3: Aux frontières de la philosophie* (Paris 1992), 41–62. This text was contributory to the mission statement of the subsector philosophy of religion of the research-school Noster.

representation and concept. What is at stake here, is the relationship between different dimensions of truth. On the one hand, a community of faith makes its truth-claims in the context of their religious stories and images. On the other, autonomous reason has its own conception of truth, which has to be situated in the context of an essentially non-religious modern society. Is there a relation between the conceptions of truth of both interpretative communities? By phrasing my question in this way, I acknowledge that the position of religion and the religious conception of truth have changed definitively because of the rise of autonomous reason. From the beginning of modern times on religion is no longer the all-embracing and all-unifying interpretative framework of reality. This is one of the fundamental insights of modern philosophy, to which Hegel has given an essential contribution. If the analysis above has shown anything at all, it is that the power of understanding, together with its specific conception of truth, has asserted its influence on the whole domain of modern civilization in such an extent, that it has affected the heart of religion. Which truth-claims can religion still make in this situation? This is in essence the systematic question Hegel was confronted with and which he presents to us.

Roughly speaking philosophy of religion has two options. Religion can accept the modern separation between faith and reason. One of the most striking examples of this is Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. In the Preface to the second edition of this work, he summarizes his view on this issue in the famous adage: "I had to supersede knowledge in order to make room for faith."²³ Many philosophers since have copied his example. It is positively possible to develop a philosophical analysis of religion in this line of thought. For it is and always will be of vital importance to religion to examine its truth-claims critically. The tradition, within which such an approach is situated, is the "*fides quaerens intellectum*."²⁴ Relating this tradition to Ricoeur's conception of philosophy of religion, it corresponds to the second dimension, i.e. a critical hermeneutic by and for the sake of the community of faith. This kind of philosophical analysis of religion is a subdiscipline of theology. Of course, also within this congenial conceptual approach of religious representations, some tension between the immediacy of revelation and mediated religious representation is inevitable. Ricoeur already pointed at the disappearance of immediacy, the distance in

²³ I. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B. XXX.

²⁴ Cf. the introduction to this contribution.

time, and the negativity, which are involved in every hermeneutic. But it will never lead to a split between the two, because this kind of philosophy of religion is firmly embedded in the non-hermeneutic moment of revelation.

However important and fruitful this approach is for philosophy of religion in our times, nevertheless one can wonder whether it really offers an adequate response to the enormous challenge that modern culture, with its specific conception of truth, poses to religion. In this situation, the question about the "truth" of the truth-claims of religion on the one hand and autonomous reason on the other inevitably arises. For the term "truth" by definition refers to some kind of universality. A religious conviction that is only true for me or for a limited community cannot claim to be true in the long run. The beginning of all reflection, and thus also of philosophy consists in the critical question of whether my spontaneous certainties are really true.²⁵ The situation of modernity, in which religion is confronted with alternative or even competing conceptions of truth, requires a philosophical reflection on the (truth of) religious convictions, which surpasses a purely theological hermeneutic. What is the relation between the truth, confessed by a person within the context of his religious convictions, and the truth that is hegenomically proclaimed by autonomous reason, which has liberated itself from its religious bonds? A theological hermeneutic (Ricoeur's second dimension) cannot give the exclusive answer to this question. This situation, which is ours, specifically asks for a kind of philosophy of religion that enters into a discussion on the relationship between these diverging conceptions of truth. This is the reason why there is "a need of a philosophy," which is more appropriate than religion and theology to criticize the sovereign truth-claims of autonomous reason. The need of philosophy thus is the sign of the need of man for a "truth about truth." Such a philosophy of religion is situated within the third dimension, distinguished by Ricoeur. But its approach is rather metaphysical than hermeneutic, since the question of the universality of truth is central here. The basic assumption of such metaphysics is the unity of reason and of truth. With this, I do not mean a monolithic unity, in which no distinctions could be made, but an organic unity, which is constantly

²⁵ This is also the essence of the dialectic in the *Phenomenology of spirit*, which is aimed at elevating the natural consciousness with its spontaneous certainties to the standpoint of truth, which coincides with that of philosophical science.

developing. From this perspective, there cannot be a fundamental separation between one kind of truth and another, e.g. between the truth of religion and the truth of autonomous reason. Truth is not only a subjective construction by scientific reason, but also something that is found or discovered. Therefore, there cannot be a radical split between (religious) representation and (philosophical) concept, because they both relate to the same content.²⁶

With this reasoning, I may have shown the necessity of a metaphysical approach within philosophy of religion. But as I showed above, this approach brings the tension between representation and concept to a head. Isn't a metaphysical inquiry of religion aimed at superseding the particular, historical, contingent form of religious truth in a universal, necessary, eternal form, which is typical for conceptual truth? Can we really trust on the truth of the metaphysical assumption that the essence of religious truth is preserved in the process of supersession? What happens with the specific form of religion, with its stories, images, symbols, and rituals in all their sensuousness and historicity? What right to exist do they still have, once that concept has gained the upper hand of representation? What is at stake here, is the nature of the supersession of religious representation in metaphysical concept. Here we have the crux of Hegel's philosophical project, viz. the dialectical supersession of all subordinate figures of truth in the conceptual truth of philosophy. For many contemporary philosophers, it is the pre-eminent object of their criticisms. In their eyes, the supersession is not a manifestation of the reasonableness of reality as such, but it is on the contrary an expression of the subtle violence of reason itself. Hereby, I specifically have in mind the criticism of all kinds of metaphysical logocentrism, at the fact that metaphysics does not have an eye for ontological difference, the reduction of the radical otherness of God to the order of "the same."

This radical criticism of the very possibility of the supersession of representation in concept shows a fundamental distrust with regard to the universality and unity of reason. This is what the "philosophers of distrust," such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and deconstructive thinking, are after. They solve the tension between representation and concept by keeping them completely apart from each other. From this

²⁶ Because of this I doubt whether Ricoeur's determination of philosophy of religion as a hermeneutics of religious representation does justice to Hegel's philosophical project. The essential metaphysical dimension of Hegel's thought is left aside here.

perspective, every truth (including religious truth) is inextricably bound up with a particular situation, with a specific time and place. From this perspective, the very question about the "truth of different truth-claims" is meaningless on beforehand. Although this position is quite popular in contemporary continental philosophy, it seems to me in flat contradiction with the philosophical project itself. As a radical critical reflection, philosophy precisely aims at posing the question about the truth of truth, and is not satisfied with a multiplicity of "local truths," whatever this term may mean.²⁷

But the repudiation of this extreme solution of the tension between representation and concept does not yet clarify how this relationship indeed has to be conceived. Can the concept supersede the representation as representation? Can philosophy separate the content of religion, God or the absolute, from the specific religious form, i.e. its alignment to the sensual, unique, historical etc.? Is such an approach really a philosophy of religion or does it betray its object? This is the weighty question Ricoeur puts to a metaphysical philosophy of religion.

In the section on absolute knowing in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel states that time is annihilated in absolute knowing (GW 9.429). All what happens is superseded in the eternity and universality of the concept. As far as religion is concerned, this could indicate that the specific form of religion has become obsolete, once that the concept has unfolded itself fully. But on the other hand, also according to Hegel, history is never completed. For philosophy of religion this implies that religion, as a historical reality, is a constant condition of possibility for the concept, which tries to understand this reality. The specific form of religion can only be superseded, if it is given as a reality to conceptual thinking. In this way the concept is continually referred back to representation. The latter is the necessary material, which is given to thinking.

Another element of the answer to the question about the relationship between representation and concept comes to the fore when we take a closer look at Hegel's statement that philosophy has to be practical, i.e. that it can learn us how to live, and contributes to the coming of the Kingdom of God. As we have seen above, both life and the Kingdom of God have a religious and an ethico-political dimension;

thus, philosophy also contributes to realization of the good life. After his initial enthusiasm about the capability of philosophy to contribute effectively to this project, Hegel becomes more and more dubious about his view that philosophy above all has to be practical. As a sign of this, the term "Kingdom of God" gradually disappears from his texts. But nevertheless Hegel remains convinced of the importance of the content of this ideal. In this sense he keeps "the ideal of his youth" in his later writings as well. What does change however, is the reflective form this ideal gets. As a result of this, Hegel acknowledges that philosophy is not able to realize the ideal of the Kingdom of God, neither the harmonious community of a free people (the good life in the ethico-political sense of the word) directly and immediately. Philosophy is a theoretical activity, and its primordial task is "to show what it is time for." In relation to religion, the consequence of this is that philosophy has to fall back on the historical form of religious representation.

All this implies that the concept is constantly referred back to the specific character of representation. Does this mean that we have come back to Ricoeur's insight that between representation and concept there is a continuous circle-relationship? Yes and no. The above has made clear that history does not come to its end in philosophy. The former is continually food for thought for the latter, in the plural sense of this expression. In this sense, there one can indeed speak of a hermeneutic circle between the immediacy of revelation and its mediation by religious representation, and a further mediation by the philosophical concept. But at the same time, it is clear that this circle is a broken one. With this I want to refer especially to the metaphysical dimension, which is present in every philosophy, and thus also in philosophy of religion. Through my analysis of Hegel's conception of the relationship between representation and concept, I tried to show that this metaphysical dimension is of crucial importance, once that religion is confronted with alternative conceptions of truth. What is finally at stake here, is the necessarily critical character of philosophy of religion with regard to spontaneous religious certainties. Metaphysics has always been a quest for the essential and universal, to the "truth of what presents itself as such" etc. By asking the metaphysical question about the truth of religious truth, philosophy of religion prevents its hermeneutics of religious representation to become a closed circle, which is only inwardly orientated and thus secludes itself from truth as such. By taking up this metaphysical question, philosophy of religion

²⁷ For a more elaborate critical assessment of this cf. P. Jonkers, "Op zoek naar een waarheid die verplicht," *Bijdragen* 58/2 (1997): 194–205.

recognizes that its relation with the immediacy of religious representation is a broken one, and thus opens up the hermeneutic circle. Philosophy of religion neither *cannot*, nor *may* supersede the tension between representation and concept. On the contrary, enduring this tension is its most important challenge in our times.

Beyond Representation and Concept: The Language of Testimony

R.D.N. van Riessen (Kampen)

Introduction

When Moses ascended up to Mount Sinai to receive the commandments, he did not see God. Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke. In the darkness of this smoke Moses presented himself before God. Mystical authors often quoted this image from the life of Moses to show that God cannot be known. He is inaccessible to human knowledge and He can only be known or approached by the way of not-knowing. Where we know nothing and are nowhere, there is place for God who, measured to our standards, is nothing and nowhere.¹

But what do mystical authors mean by the way of not knowing? In his book about the life of Moses, Gregory of Nyssa explains that we have to realise that the nature of God is invisible, so that we must leave behind all worldly knowledge, all sensible experience and all human reasoning. True knowledge and true theory have to concentrate on the realisation that God is invisible. In Gregory's thinking, Moses exemplifies the human being seeking for God. Just like Moses had to enter the dark cloud of un-knowing, so we have to leave behind all that we can see and know. The way to knowledge of God is a way of releasing and letting go.²

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite refers to the same story in Exodus when he says that Moses liberates himself of the things that can be seen and enters into the darkness of not-knowing.³ The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, writing in the tradition of the Cappadocian Fathers (England 1380), says that knowledge of God as He is in and for

¹ Cf. James Walsh, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Ch. LXVIII: "Do not leave off, but press on earnestly in that nothing with an alert desire in your will to have God, whom no man can know."

² Grégoire de Nyse, *La vie de Moïse ou traité de la perfection en matière de vertu*, Introduction, texte critique et traduction de Jean Daniélou (Paris 1968), Deuxième Partie, Ch. 162–163.

³ Pseudo-Dionysius de Areopagite, *Oeuvre mystique théologique* (Kampen 1990) Ch. I and II.